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LITERATURE, THE TEACHER, AND THE TEENS*

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On the walls of my old college literary-society hall there is this motto, *Vita sine litteris mors est*—"Life without literature is death." But the motto is a death sentence which does not seem to scare very many people. Like the principal of Louvain in Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*, they enjoy their meals without literature, and what's the use? Doubtless some intend to turn to it as to religion in deathbed repentance, but for the present they continue in their sins. The fact is, most people do not believe that old motto, and they do not believe it because they wholly misconceive what literature is. The popular notion of literature is one or all of three things: it is looked upon as a rose for the buttonhole, a ribbon for the garment of life, a sort of ornament, pleasing enough, but utterly useless; or it is thought to be a sentimentally effeminate thing which girls and women used to take to before they got to making street-corner speeches and praying "O Lord, give us this day our daily ballot"; or it is viewed as a textbook task of about three hundred pages in dark-blue covers which some hateful school teacher has put together because of his dislike for happy young lives. This last notion prevails generally in the teen age. But literature is not a rose for the buttonhole of life, it is not an effeminate sentimentality, it is not a textbook thing made by pedagogues

*Read before the West Virginia Council of Teachers of English, November, 1916.

wherewithal to torture happy young hearts; it is a thing to be experienced, a thing to be lived.

But let us take my subject, word for word, and construe it, schoolmaster-fashion. If I become deranged in my parts of speech, please remember that I have the good company of all of the Mrs. Malaprops and most of the politicians.

"Literature, the Teacher, and the Teens." "Literature" is a noun, very proper, often too proper to be effective, for it must not shock the delicate sensibilities of either the teacher or the young student; infinite number; possessive case, if it has what it claims to have. "Teacher" is a verb, active, loud, or gentle voice; usually feminine gender; imperative, vocative, sweet, or grouchy mood; copulative, serving to connect the subject "Literature" with the predicate "Teens"; present tense, though sometimes, unfortunately, pluperfect long ago; conjugated regularly every day. "Teens" is an interjection. An interjection is a word (in this instance a group of young people) which expresses an emotion and which is not connected with any other word in the sentence. This definition is from Lewis Hosis's brand-new *Practical English for Secondary Schools*. Obviously, then, boys and girls are interjections, for they are mostly emotion and have no sort of connection with either "Literature" or "Teacher." Other examples of interjections are: "Oh, what a noise!" "Alas, I can't get my lessons!" "Pshaw, I don't want to!" "Gee, ain't it fierce!" These expressions are all in their teens, and are therefore interjections.

Now, having construed the sentence and named its parts of speech in perfect accordance with the sound principle that the part of speech to which a word belongs is determined solely by the function it fulfils in the sentence, the task before us is as plain as daylight. That problem is, How are we going to get the interjection "Teens," at one end of the sentence, and the noun "Literature," at the other end of it, together? The word "Teacher" between them looks like a kind of bridge connecting the two—a sort of *pons asinorum*, do you say? I object to a teacher of literature being called a *pons asinorum*. How, then, are we going to get the "Teens" and "Literature" together? Perhaps the simplest method is to take the "Teacher" out of the way. "Literature, the

Teacher, and the Teens"—remove the "Teacher," and there you are, "Literature" and the "Teens" side by side. How beautiful they look, and how happy they ought to be, these emotional interjections and this very proper substantive or substance! And indeed it is often, very often, the best way. Here stands this fussy verb, actually, though not intentionally, obstructing the way. Sometimes her hands are full of the heads and tails of words, and dry bones, and things called dates, which she dangles before the eyes of these emotional, ejaculatory "Teens." The result is more emotion, but of the sort not desired; and more ejaculation. The "Teacher" may be a transitive verb and still be like the illustration of the transitive in Lewis Hosis's book: "The woman set the hen on the eggs." She may set the children on the literature and go about her business. The children and the hen alike will attend to the hatching. In neither case should the nest be poked into every day to ascertain whether or not the warming-up process is going on. Or the "Teacher" may stand an incarnate imperative mood between "Literature" and "Teens." A famous head master of Eton, after reading to the boys the passage of Scripture, "Be ye pure in heart," glowered at them and thundered, "Are you pure in heart? If you are not, I'll flog you till you are." The imperative mood is not likely to bring "Literature" and the "Teens" to a better understanding.

Yes, I am quite sure that sometimes—many times—the wisest thing for the teacher to do is to step quietly, graciously, and willingly out of the way and watch with thankful heart while the teens take what the gods have provided for them. I assume, of course, that in all such cases the feast is accessible and the viands various and suitable.

But this removal of the teacher, no matter how gentle the operation, will not do in the majority of cases, for three reasons: first, a great many children need to be taught to drink, even after they have been led to the trough; secondly, home and school conditions, in most cases, are not such as to make this natural method of feeding on the nectar of the gods feasible—most children have to be brought up by hand or by the bottle; thirdly, the teacher needs the job for a living. Since it is evident that in most cases the teens

need the teacher and the teacher in all cases needs the job, we must leave her where she is.

And I for one do not think that literature and normal youth are, after all, very far apart. They cannot be. Literature and young life are too much alike, too essentially of the same stuff, to be very far apart. The separation is not natural. All literature grows out of the fact that life is an interesting thing. "All literature is the expression of feeling, of passion, of emotion, caused by a sensation of the interestingness of life," says Arnold Bennett. The lives of the great makers of literature "are one long ecstasy of denying that the world is a dull place." "They have seen and felt the miraculous interestingness of life." Moreover, the more deeply interesting life and nature and the universe have been to them—that is to say, the more their emotions have been aroused by this interestingness of life—the more likely have they been to express their feelings in verse. But whether in verse or prose, whether lyric cry, rhymed narrative, short-story, stately novel, whimsical essay, or whatever form the expression may take, it grows out of the fact that some phase of human life or nature or the universe was so intensely interesting to the writer that he had to tell about it. For example, the amazing interestingness of human life in every conceivable situation is the secret of the prodigious success of O. Henry. Every one of the four millions of lives in New York City contained a good story for his genius. When Wordsworth and Coleridge, strolling among the Quantock Hills, decided to divide the universe between them, the latter to take supernatural things and treat them so that they would seem common, and the former to take common things and treat them so that never more would they seem to be common or unclean, they were but expressing in an imperious way that interestingness of all nature and all life out of which all literature springs. The interest that life held for Lord Byron was as far away as the world's end from the interest that it held for Charles Lamb, but Lord Byron and Charles Lamb both made literature for exactly the same reason.

Now, if all literature grows out of this miraculous interestingness of life, then it would seem that life in its teens would more than at any other time take to literature—its enjoyment as well as its

expression. For surely then, if ever, the heart is thrilled with the wonder and marvel and interestingness of life. The lad in his teens is in the very period of literature. He lives it. He lives love lyrics and love stories; he lives tales of adventure; knight-hood is in flower; every goose is a swan and every lass a queen; it is the period of religious ferment; the period of tumbled and jumbled passions born of gods and beasts; the period of magic case-ments and of half-formed schemes and dreams of life. It is the Elizabethan Age of the mind, characterized by a splendid audacity, by the zest of quest and adventure, by an overflowing exuberance. The youth is living literature and does not know it! He does not see the similarity between the literature which he is living and the three-hundred-page blue-backed textbook filled with names and dates and classifications. There are, of course, whole tracts of literature—whole continents of literature—which his experiences as yet do not cover, but within his own realm the material of his life and the material of literature are identical. If literature is, as Barrett Wendell defines it, “the lasting expression in words of the meaning of life,” then surely there must be some literature which to the teens will be as native as hunting or playing, as making love or dreaming dreams. But it is not found in Milton’s *Lycidas* or Burke’s *Conciliation*. Are you going to shut this young Elizabethan up in the prim and precise compartments of Jane Austen when he wants to go a-swashbuckling as his fellow Elizabethans, Captain John Smith and Sir Walter Raleigh, did? It’s “Westward Ho!” for him. Let him sail into the sun to his heart’s content. Let him go a-roving in his literature as in his life. And do not be too squeamish with him. Do not be afraid of life. The trouble with literature teachers and with the makers of much of the classic American literature is that they and it are afraid of the things that really make life worth the adventure. And they and it are afraid, too, of being shocked by the language of strong men and vital women. When William Sydney Porter (O. Henry) wrote a little sketch of his life at the insistence of a New York publisher he concluded it in this fashion:

I was born and raised in “No’th Ca’lina” and at eighteen went to Texas and ran wild on the prairies. Wild yet, but not so wild. Can’t get to loving

New Yorkers. Live all alone in a great big two rooms on quiet old Irving Place three doors from Wash. Irving's old home. Kind of lonesome. Was thinking lately (since the April moon commenced to shine) how I'd like to be down South, where I could happen over to Miss Ethel's or Miss Sallie's and sit on the porch—not on a chair—on the edge of the porch, and lay my straw hat on the steps and lay my head back against the honeysuckle on the post—and just talk. And Miss Ethel would go in directly (they say presently up here) and bring out the guitar. She would complain that the E string was broken, but no one would believe her; and pretty soon all of us would be singing the "Swanee River" and "In the Evening by Moonlight" and—oh, gol darn it, what's the use of wishing.

Now that last sentence would shock some good people; perhaps some of you felt a little jar; but there is nothing profane, nothing coarse, about it. It is a perfectly natural outburst of feeling, and it is the most beautiful sentence in the paragraph.

What I am trying to say is that we must find out what the miraculous interestingness of life consists of for the student of the teen age; and we must recognize too, without any academic or pedagogic or theologic or any other sort of questioning, that with the normal boy or girl these interests are *right*; that they are what they ought to be at that stage, that boys and girls are neither mediaeval saints nor Pittsburgh sinners; that their interests are susceptible of being shaped to the finest ends and ripened into the fairest fruits of life.

Now if the teacher accepts this view of the natural relation between literature and the teens, and *if* the teacher is at liberty to use her own judgment and to handle her subject as she pleases, several very definite things could be done. First, I would kick all of the patent desks out of the literature room. Patent strait-jacket desks may be all right for the mathematics, but they are death to literature. I would have bookcases with hundreds of books in them, and I would have pictures of great writers on the walls. I would let the youngsters group themselves freely about me in armchairs, and we would be at our ease in our literary inn. The room would have the appearance and atmosphere of a place where literature was studied and enjoyed. We would read and talk and read and talk about the things of life in which they were interested and which have been expressed or interpreted in literature.

I would try to have real books of literature in the possession of the students. They ought to begin to build up a personal library as soon as they enter the high school, if not before. If they do not learn to like books in their teens, they never will; you may be very sure of that. Above all, keep them from getting the idea that literature and textbooks are synonymous terms.

The oral reading would always be done by the best readers in the class. A piece of literature should never be read aloud to others or to himself by a bungler who cannot accurately pronounce the words or melodiously phrase the sweet cadences. This, I tell you, is imperative. Let the student who cannot pronounce the words and phrases properly and meaningfully practice on selections of mere reading-matter, such as a description of how to build a boat or how to select seed corn, until he learns how to read. Do not let him profane "The Ode to a Nightingale," or "The Solitary Reaper," or the trial scene in the impeachment of Warren Hastings by blundering through it while his fellow-students listen in pain and the teacher calls it reading literature. It is not literature from such lips; it is but the mutilated remains of literature.

In the next place, I would get at literature itself. Don't worry these high-school Freshmen and Sophomores about literary theories and classifications and periods and ages. These are all general ideas. What they want are concrete personal experiences and the ideas that grow out of them. In a little country high school I found a class of children studying the development of the drama, its theory and technique. Upon inquiry I found that not one of them had ever seen a dramatic performance and that the only drama they had ever read was one of Shakespeare's plays. How absurd! This is not studying literature; it is studying about literature, which is a very different thing and properly comes much later.

We should remember, too, that every book is the expression of a personality, every piece of literature a human document; and young folk are interested in people, especially if they are really interesting people. A man who can write a great book or story or poem is sure to be an interesting personality if we come to know him rightly. When you are reading the essays of John Burroughs,

you are not so much reading a book as you are reading John Burroughs. You are seeing why John Burroughs finds life and nature so interesting that he wants to tell everybody else about them. For these reasons we should make good use of biography. In the old days the poet and the tale-teller sang or told their literature to the people, face to face. The hearers got the man and his production together; they got his personality as well as his interpretation of life. We cannot bring Chaucer and Goldsmith and Robert Louis Stevenson and Mark Twain into the classroom to tell us about the things which made life such an interesting miracle to them; if we could, every student would be in his place, and there would be no trouble about getting him interested in literature. It is even conceivable that a boy would be willing to postpone a game of football for an hour or two to hear Mark Twain tell about the adventures of Huck Finn or Tom Sawyer or to listen to Stevenson's adventures on the Spanish Main. At best, biographical facts are but a pale and weak substitute for the personal presence of the maker of a book, but biographical facts can be so presented as to be of immense service in stimulating interest. I do not mean dates or the periods into which some textbook divides a man's life, but the vital things that helped to make him what he was. Or perhaps a mere incident connected with a piece of writing will make the students want to read it. Tell them, for example, that during the Napoleonic War the Scotch poet, Thomas Campbell, was arrested on suspicion of being a traitor; when he was brought before the court his only defense was to hand to the magistrate the manuscript of a poem. The magistrate read it and instantly released him. The poem was that stirring and splendid battle chant, "Ye Mariners of England." Immediately they will want you to read it to them.

This leads me to say that I doubt if we give enough attention to preparing the minds of our students for the reception and appreciation of works of literary art. It is vastly important that the first impression of a piece of literature should be a good impression. The child should not have to overcome a dislike for it; and so we should be very careful how we introduce it. If possible, let there be love at first sight. Adroit advertising in advance of the time

of first meeting is perfectly legitimate.¹ We are all anxious to meet persons of whose charm or nobility we have heard report. But what I have in mind is not so much general rumor as special preparation, to the end that the first impression from the reading shall be a powerful impression—a genuine red-letter day in the student's experience. Sometimes this preparation must be made suddenly, intensively, by taking advantage of a situation or an occurrence. Generally, though, this preparation must be planned for in advance. Let me take a concrete case. Suppose you want the class to become acquainted with Browning's "The Patriot," an admirable little poem for the high-school age. Several days in advance of its reading you will remark to the class, quite incidentally, that you are going to tell them the story of Savonarola, or maybe the story of Arnaldo of Brescia, or maybe you will ask them if they have noticed how quickly in our own country a popular idol may be sometimes turned against by those who had followed him with cheers and bands and banners—Admiral Dewey, Mr. Roosevelt, or Mr. Bryan. It is an old story, the fickleness of the crowd. Sometimes it meant, in other days, adoration today and tomorrow a public hanging or burning, and ashes scattered in the Arno or the Thames; sometimes it means, in our own day, high office and honors, followed by overwhelming defeat at the polls if the patriot does not succeed in getting for the people what they want, though he may have striven with all his might to get them something far better. It is an old story—heroes today and martyrs tomorrow. You will talk freely about these things, more than once perhaps, and you will tell the class that on a certain day you will read with them a poem about a man who had just such an experience. And then you will further prepare their minds by talking with them, also in advance of the reading of the poem, of a peculiar sort of poetry which is like one end of a telephone conversation. What is said at the other end cannot be heard at all—you have to guess at it.

When the great day comes for the reading of "The Patriot," you will ask the class if they remember the discussion about the fickleness of the crowd, and if they recall what was said about a certain peculiar kind of poetry like telephone talk. Then you will

¹ See F. H. Hayward, *The Lessons in Appreciation*. Macmillan.

tell them that the patriot in the poem is on his way to the gallows, in the rain, with his hands tied behind him; there is blood on his forehead, he thinks, from the stones they fling at him, though he can't put his hand up to wipe it off. He is doing all of the talking that you can hear. An officer is walking by his side, with a tight hold on the handcuffs, no doubt, and it is to the officer that the patriot is talking. This is what he says:

THE PATRIOT

AN OLD STORY

I

It was roses, roses, all the way,
With myrtle mixed in my path like mad;
The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,
A year ago on this very day.

II

The air broke into a mist with bells,
The old walls rocked with the crowd and cries.
Had I said, "Good folk, mere noise repels—
But give me your sun from yonder skies!"
They had answered, "And afterward, what else?"

III

Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun
To give it my loving friends to keep!
Naught man could do, have I left undone:
And you see my harvest, what I reap
This very day, now a year is run.

IV

There's nobody on the house-tops now—
Just a palsied few at the windows set;
For the best of the sight is, all allow,
At the Shambles' Gate—or, better yet,
By the very scaffold's foot, I trow.

V

I go in the rain, and, more than needs,
 A rope cuts both my hands behind;
 And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,
 For they fling, whoever has a mind,
 Stones at me for my year's misdeeds.

VI

Thus I entered, and thus I go!
 In triumphs, people have dropped down dead.
 "Paid by the world, what dost thou owe
 Me?"—God might question; now instead,
 'Tis God shall repay: I am safer so.

Then, or later, you will talk with them about the deep and beautiful meaning of the closing lines. The patriot has said that, if he had died at the height of his triumph, a year ago, when the church spires were aflame with flags and when the air broke into a mist with bells ringing his praises, God might have said to him, "You have had your reward, I do not owe you anything"; but now when he shall have passed the gallows' gate, 'tis God himself and not the fickle crowd to whom he will look for his reward: "*I am safer so.*"

In this brief address I have done my best to get at the heart of the matter. I have treated literature and life, not, of course, as identical, but as inseparable, terms; and young life and certain kinds of literature as having an affinity which the wise teacher will recognize in bringing the two together. This coming together of literature and young life ought to be a very agreeable experience, but, while the learning of literature ought to be an agreeable thing, let me caution you against the notion that it is an easy thing or a brief process. The intellectually and spiritually indolent will never attain unto it. In the study of literature one must be willing to give himself to the utmost. It is the joy of work rather than the joy of play. And the teachers of literature to the teens should never forget that only life begets life. One who is not stirred with the interestingness both of literature and of life is out of place in this proud hierarchy of "Literature, the Teacher, and the Teens."